

Butt, J. (2018) Monteverdi, the 1610 Vespers and the beginnings of the modern musical work. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 143(1), pp. 21-50. (doi:[10.1080/02690403.2018.1434328](https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1434328))

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/152088/>

Deposited on: 22 November 2017

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

# **Monteverdi, the 1610 Vespers and the Beginnings of the Modern Musical Work**

**John Butt – University of Glasgow**

**Wordcount with footnotes: 13,167**

## **Abstract:**

The elevated status of Monteverdi's 1610 *Vespers* over the last century provides the starting point for an inquiry into which factors render it so durable. In going against the grain of recent attempts to discern the possible liturgical context for its original performance, this study claims that the collection as a whole (components of which undoubtedly had liturgical origins) can only be exemplary. Moreover, Monteverdi in his intense engagement with the impersonation of liturgical chanting, has effectively rendered it the analogue of an actual service. Several features suggest that he is capturing something of the listening experience of a liturgy, complete with its distortions and memories. As a collection that is 'about' Vespers and which doubles the experience one might be having, this has something in common with the 'musical work' as defined by later classical practice, and its very religiosity resonates with the secularized ideology of musical autonomy.

## **Biography:**

John Butt is Gardiner Professor of Music at the University of Glasgow. His work centres on music of the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, but he is also concerned with the implications of the past in our present culture. He is author of five monographs and has been director or soloist on some 25 recordings.

He has received the OBE, FBA and FRSE, and has been awarded the Dent Medal, the RAM/Kohn Foundation's Bach Prize and RCO medal.

**Keywords:** Monteverdi; 1610 Vespers; Listening Cultures; Musical Work; (Early) Modernity

**Author details:**

[john.butt@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:john.butt@glasgow.ac.uk)

**Music,**

**University of Glasgow,**

**14 University Gardens**

**Glasgow**

**G12 8QQ**

**John Butt**

The history of the revival of Claudio Monteverdi's *Vespro della Beata Vergine* (the '1610 Vespers') is virtually a model for the process by which significant music from the past could become a 'masterwork' in the twentieth century. It was known to certain music historians in the nineteenth century, revived and published by the middle of the twentieth, and became a major object of concert performance and recording thereafter. The fact that it can draw large audiences, appeal to performers beyond the period specialists and engender considerable scholarly debate puts it into a category that is shared by virtually no earlier work (with the obvious exception of the composer's first opera, *Orfeo* of 1607). While there is plentiful and enduring public interest in all forms of 'early music', one of the things that may single out Monteverdi's Vespers is the fact that it conveniently fills the time of a complete modern concert. Whatever solutions are found to the issues of its precise contents, ordering, pitch and performance

practice, it seems to sustain sufficient interest and consistency to work as a whole, rather as if it were a short oratorio in the Handelian mould.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, much of the structuring and consistency that seem to belong to the 1610 Vespers comes from its original function in constituting the major part of the Roman office of Vespers, something that brings its own shape and trajectory in real time.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, most attempts to relate the work to an actual liturgy have generally been unsatisfactory, at least in terms of preserving the trajectory and accumulation implied by the original print order.<sup>3</sup> Uwe Wolf suggests instead that Monteverdi's ordering is 'expedient, exemplary, and programmatic – independent of any general liturgical context.'<sup>4</sup> It would be more accurate to suggest that the work might be independent of a *specific* liturgical context. The Vespers liturgy is itself a 'general liturgical context' after all, and Monteverdi clearly hoped for some type of future use, given that he provided *ad libitum* instrumental ritornelli in the first psalm and an alternative Magnificat without instruments. Nevertheless, while Monteverdi could hardly have had a

---

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent summary of the recent recording history and the implications of its status as a 'concert work', see Lindsay Kemp 'Monteverdi's Vespers: which recording is best?', *Gramophone* review, 9 February 2015, <http://www.gramophone.co.uk/feature/monteverdi-vespers-which-recording-is-best> (accessed 6 December 2016). For the most recent edition and a summary of previous editions, see Uwe Wolf, ed., *Vespro della Beata Vergine*, Claudio Monteverdi, Carus-Verlag (Stuttgart, 2013), Foreword. The most extensive and comprehensive study of the work is Jeffrey Kurtzman, *The Monteverdi Vespers of 1610: Music, Context, Performance* (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> For reference, the liturgy of Vespers consisted of: Versicle/Response, followed by Gloria and Alleluia; five Psalms, each preceded and followed by an Antiphon; Chapter (lesson); Hymn; Magnificat, preceded and followed by an Antiphon; Collect and final responses.

<sup>3</sup> Monteverdi's original print order is: Response, 'Domine ad adiuvandum'; five Psalms ('Dixit dominus', 'Laudate pueri', 'Laetatus sum', 'Nisi dominus', 'Lauda Jerusalem'), interspersed with four motets ('Nigra sum', 'Pulchra es', 'Duo seraphim', 'Audi coeli'); Sonata sopra Sancta Maria; Hymn, 'Ave maris stella'; Magnificat (7 voice version); Magnificat (alternative 6 voice version).

<sup>4</sup> Wolf, *Vespro*, Foreword, XIII.

modern concert in mind, there is clearly a sense in which he was creating what was a potential liturgy out of pre-existing and/or newly-composed material. A further level of identity is afforded by Monteverdi's customizing of the liturgy towards Marian devotion, thus giving a theme – with its obvious emotional and spiritual resonances – to a well-worn structure. The work as a whole could obviously double as a portfolio to demonstrate the composer's skill and also provide a resource for potential vesper performances.

If we see the 1610 Vespers as coming in the composer's career between the publication of the Fifth (1605) and Sixth (1614) Books of madrigals, it may be apparent that Monteverdi thought along similar lines in terms of his overall structuring of the collection. As Mauro Calcagno has shown, composers of madrigal collections in the generation immediately before Monteverdi were already developing narrative designs that paralleled those of the poetry collections concerned (and thus conforming to the expectations and experiences of cultivated listeners and readers).<sup>5</sup> Such designs were closely related to rhetorical principles, by which a general framework (happy, tragic endings etc.) was outlined by the opening and closing sections, and the more flexible centre could be articulated through multiple departures and returns. The individual pieces could then be connected through key words or musical elements. Calcagno employs the useful notion of 'palimpsest', by which a musical ordering is inscribed on top of that of the poet(s), a layering that could further be elaborated in performance and which would add to the delight of a cognisant

---

<sup>5</sup> Mauro Calcagno, *From Madrigal to Opera: Monteverdi's Staging of the Self* (Berkeley, 2012), 153-5.

audience.<sup>6</sup> If this approach were applied to the 1610 Vespers it could suggest that Monteverdi's settings create another sort of palimpsest: the music of diverse styles is inscribed over a pre-existing, but flexible, liturgical model.

Tim Carter's study of the Sixth Book (1614) shows the composer devising a bipartite structure, with laments opening each half, and each followed by a Petrarch setting (8). One might likewise see the 1610 publication as falling into two obvious halves, comprising a Mass (*Missa In illo tempore*) as the first half and the Vespers as the second. But, further to this, the Vespers itself falls into two obvious divisions in which the five regular psalms and four 'modern' sacred concertos of the first half are balanced by the Sonata, Hymn and Magnificat (alternative versions in 7 and 6 voices) in the second, each underpinned by a regular cantus firmus (similar to the psalms) or Gregorian melody, and combined with many of the sorts of expressive and ornamental gestures first heard in the sacred concertos. The predominantly instrumental texture of the Sonata is the first use of upper instruments since the first psalm (at least according to Monteverdi's original parts – *colla parte* doubling elsewhere is not necessarily to be excluded), and with its independent instrumental parts it recalls something of the sonority of the opening response. Moreover, the closing 'Sicut erat' of the seven-part Magnificat, with its specification of all the instruments doubling the full choral texture, also recalls the sumptuous sonority of the opening.

Giambattista Marino's influence on the Gonzaga court began precisely in the years leading up to Monteverdi's 1610 publication,<sup>7</sup> and it may

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

well have had an effect on the composer's general outlook in setting collections of texts that somehow formed a whole, but which required an alternative sense of sequencing and narrative voicing to that of opera. Monteverdi may thus have seen particular opportunities in adapting something of the approach he was developing within the madrigal tradition towards his setting of traditional texts appropriate for the vesper liturgy. While the trajectory of a madrigal collection is harder to follow for a modern audience, at least without something equivalent to the background and elite education of the original listeners, perhaps the integration of similar principles within a more obvious ritual sequence might partly account for the modern success of the 1610 Vespers as a work to be heard in one sitting.

One of the points that makes this setting so recognisable as a ritual is the ubiquity of the traditional chant, which is heard more-or-less continuously in a large number of the movements; this distinguishes the collection quite strongly from the majority of Monteverdi's later church music, published in the *Selva morale* of 1640-1. Indeed, Monteverdi seems to have gone beyond virtually any contemporary in maintaining an almost constant reference to the psalm tones throughout the psalm settings and Magnificat.<sup>8</sup> While this might imply a work that would be overly regular and repetitive in comparison with later concert pieces, it has been suggested that this may actually play a part in its success. Jeffrey Kurtzman sees it as part of a productive tension between old and

---

<sup>7</sup> Tim Carter, 'Beyond Drama: Monteverdi, Marino, and the Sixth Book of Madrigals (1614)', *JAMS*, 69/1 (2016), 1-46, 5.

<sup>8</sup> The seemingly unifying element of the chant *canti fermi* is made explicit in the title of the original 1610 bass continuo part: 'Vespro della B. Vergine da concerto, composta sopra canti fermi'. For its relation to the contemporary context of psalm and Magnificat settings, see Paulo Fabbri, *Monteverdi*, trans Tim Carter (Turin, 1985; trans Cambridge, 1994), 114-15.

new: 'Monteverdi's psalms doubtless make a stronger impression on the listener than those of his contemporaries. Although many factors contribute to this, there can be little question that among the most important are the dynamic tensions between cohesion and diversity and between conservatism and modernity...' <sup>9</sup>

What Kurtzman is intuiting may be one of the essential aspects of the Vespers from the point of view of later generations, a sort of dialectic or charge that bridges several historical styles. Indeed, this might reflect Monteverdi's own awareness of historical change and stylistic plurality, as made clear by the notorious Artusi dispute in which the composer defended his music in the most up-to-date style (*seconda pratica*) by claiming that it was being inappropriately judged by the standards of the earlier style (*prima pratica*).<sup>10</sup> The publication of 1610 seems to make a special point by prefacing the Vespers with a *prima pratica* Mass (based on points of imitation taken from a canonical composer in the earlier style, Nicholas Gombert) in order to demonstrate Monteverdi's mastery of both styles.<sup>11</sup> But it would be wrong to assume that the Vespers is entirely in the *seconda pratica*: while the sacred concertos (with the

---

<sup>9</sup> Kurtzman, *The Monteverdi Vespers*, 129.

<sup>10</sup> See Claude V. Palisca, 'The Artusi-Monteverdi Controversy', in Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune (eds), *The New Monteverdi Companion* (London, 1985), 127-58; reprinted in Claude V. Palisca, *Studies in the History of Italian Music and Music Theory* (Oxford, 1994), 54-84; Tim Carter, 'Artusi, Monteverdi, and the Poetics of Modern Music', in Nancy Kovaleff Baker and Barbara Russano Hanning (eds), *Musical Humanism and its Legacy: Essays in Honor of Claude V. Palisca* (Stuyvesant, NY, 1992), 171-94.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed Monteverdi, in his preface to the entire publication implies that he is partly responding to recent criticism: '& claudantur ora in Claudium loquentium iniqua' ('and so that the mouths of those speaking unjust things against Claudio may be closed'). This, together with his obvious unhappiness with his appointment in Mantua, may well have created something of a 'mid-life crisis' for the composer, something that could well have inspired him to work in such detail and intensity on the dual publication of 1610. For a re-evaluation of this period of the composer's biography, see Tim Carter, 'Monteverdi and Some Problems of Biography', *Journal of Seventeenth-Century Music*, 18/1 (2012).



exception of the choral conclusion of 'Audi coelum') can be ascribed to this style, the psalms and Magnificat present an astonishing mixture of traditional multi-voiced music, madrigalian gestures and more modern monodies and duets. Monteverdi here seems to be developing something of the range of voicing that he was to exploit so strikingly in his later books of madrigals. The very recognition of more than one compositional method seems to have led to the possibility of unexpected hybrids, as if each style could act as an enzyme capable of digesting the other and thus producing something new.<sup>12</sup>

It is the Vesper collection, with its richly mixed styles, that has garnered such enthusiasm in later reception, and not the much more purely-styled Mass (which was given a much more prominent billing in the original print). It may well be that richness of stylistic blend is one of the things that characterizes much of the music that was later to become 'canonical' (in the sense of the canon of 'musical works' that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and something that is obviously to be distinguished from the traditional pre-modern canon of exemplary musical techniques, as demonstrated in the Mass). This might also include a sort of reflexivity that involves an element of stylistic dialogue and exchange built into the music as notated. Another way of putting this might be to suggest that Monteverdi's Vesper music is not as 'innocent' as most of that which went before it; it is as if the composer had

---

<sup>12</sup> It is notable that, as soon as more than one viable musical style is acknowledged, the number of possible styles, together with their countless combinations, begins to multiply in theoretical discourse (Monteverdi himself comes up with a threefold categorization of style in his eighth book of madrigals, *Madrigali guerrieri ed amorosi* (1638)). For a useful survey of this process from the time of Monteverdi to Mattheson, see Claude V. Palisca, 'The Genesis of Mattheson's Style Classification', in George J. Buelow and Hans Joachim Marx (eds), *New Mattheson Studies* (Cambridge, 1983), 409-23.

somehow eaten some forbidden fruit of musical knowledge that gave him a degree of critical distance from both the music of his time and its recent past, in order to create a new sense of immediacy and dialogic vitality. While the various styles, idioms and allusions in the Vesper music can be identified and analysed individually, there may well be for the informed listener a critical charge set up by their interaction and mutual inflection.

The notion of an ancient-modern alloy that I borrow from Kurtzman is not to be confused with some of the more obvious ways in which Monteverdi's music could be considered 'progressive'. These latter might include the superb examples of the *seconda pratica* approach in the sacred concertos, which seem to engender the most direct expression possible of the words and their emotions within the monodic language of the day. Particularly subtle is Monteverdi's developing approach to narrative (perhaps specifically under the influence of Marino), which extends the range of complexity and nuance in terms of the voices we might hear. For instance, Carter notes that several madrigals in the Seventh Book (1619) share a single lover's voice between two singers, and this is exactly what Monteverdi did with the second sacred concerto, 'Pulchra es', in the Vespers back in 1610.<sup>13</sup> Another obviously 'modern' element is the extensive use of instruments, particularly in the 'Sonata a 8 sopra Sancta Maria', which is perhaps the largest and most brilliantly developed instrumental piece of its time. Such features are obviously striking for their comparative novelty and scale for the time at which they were written – but such innovations would not have been so immediately significant for later generations. Much the same goes for the general trend towards co-opting secular elements for sacred purposes (and right

---

<sup>13</sup> Carter, 'Beyond Drama', 8.

from the outset with the ‘Toccata’ from *Orfeo*, reworked for the opening ‘Domine ad adjuvandum’), an interesting challenge for composers of Catholic church music in the wake of the Council of Trent, but common enough at various points throughout the broader history of church music.<sup>14</sup> All these features are obviously significant, but they do not alone account for the particular quality that I am attempting to isolate. This music is perhaps ‘ahead of its time’, but not merely in the sense of stylistic and narrative innovation, novelty or expressive power.

Another clue to the special quality of the Vespers might lie in John Whenham’s observations about the first psalm setting, ‘Dixit dominus’. In verse 1 ‘Monteverdi parodies the idea of cantors initiating the psalm and the choir responding by presenting the first half of the psalm tone in imitation, together with a counter-subject; the second half of the verse – the point at which the choir would normally enter – is set for the full ensemble and, incidentally, matches the passage of direct speech.’<sup>15</sup> Key to Whenham’s insight here is the notion of ‘parody’, but this is probably not meant in the traditional sense of borrowing music from one context and using it in another, nor in the sense of poking fun at something. Monteverdi could hardly be accused of mocking something of the ‘old order’ in the way his contemporary, Cervantes, did in *Don Quixote*. If this psalm setting were used liturgically (as Monteverdi himself possibly did, either earlier in Mantua or later in Venice), it would obviously be replacing the ‘standard’ Vesper setting, by which the entire psalm would have been chanted (with or

---

<sup>14</sup> Indeed there is a possibility that Monteverdi reused this piece because the Pope may have met the composer in Mantua shortly after the original performance of *Orfeo* in 1607, Kurtzman, *The Monteverdi Vespers*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> John Whenham, *Monteverdi – Vespers (1610)*, Cambridge Music Handbooks (Cambridge, 1997), 63.

without multi-voiced chanting in chords, the *falsobordone*). Monteverdi's setting would doubtless have been heard in its own time as an elaborated version of this simpler performance practice. But Kurtzman's ancient/modern alloy and Whenham's notion of parody together imply something rather more complex than mere elaboration. They might suggest that this setting is, in some subtle sense, detached from its purely functional role. On the one hand, it is a sort of commentary on standard liturgical practice, while still using strong liturgical signifiers; on the other, it is a sort of memory of various occasions and practices, somehow superimposed within the one piece.

As soon as I suggest a role of memory I immediately imply some degree of human, subjective, presence. I am not proposing that each psalm setting is like a sort of thinking organism in its own right (although such a metaphor may well be appropriate for certain works in the later mainstream of classical music), more that it somehow mirrors or models the sort of experience that a human subject might have, conflating several experiences of Vespers into a single representation. After all, Monteverdi and his peers would have experienced countless Tridentine offices and masses by the time they reached adulthood (and the fact that Monteverdi was relatively isolated in Mantua and might not necessarily have had enormous experience of all the latest elaborate settings might mean that he was all the more forced to draw together his memories of the chanted liturgy).. I am not implying that each setting is simply a form of musical autobiography, but that Monteverdi may have co-opted his own cumulative experiences to reflect something that others too might have recognized and which might have encouraged them to reflect on the way they heard a liturgy. Indeed, the effect might be to render us more aware of the temporal process of

music in general. Therefore, a piece of this kind could function as a sort of model for listening and persisting in time, as well as a bundle of recollections. Now the concept of 'parody' takes on a deeper resonance; it suggests that some sort of doubling is happening, by which the psalm setting fulfils its liturgical function more or less perfectly but simultaneously mimics the occasion, setting up its own 'office' within the office, as it were. To adapt Mikhail Bakhtin's comments on the sonnets in *Don Quixote*, written by Cervantes at almost exactly the same time as Monteverdi's 1610 Vesper settings, the chant [sonnet] is no longer a genre in its own right but an object of representation, an image of the chant [sonnet].<sup>16</sup> But, as I will try to show, chant does not remain merely an object of representation but also inflects the entire musical setting, turning this into a sort of ritual of its own.

At this stage it is worth distinguishing this phenomenon from another form of 'doubling' in Monteverdi (and others') outputs in the early seventeenth century, namely a tendency to render in simultaneous sound the implications of texts about the efficacy of music. This is after all an overriding topic in *Orfeo*, where the music obligingly mimics the sorts of sounds to which the text refers. A later, but especially striking, example is 'Mentre vaga Angioletta' from the Eighth Book of Madrigals (1638). Here Giovanni Battista Guarini's text refers to how the lover's heart not only responds to the 'angel's' singing but somehow adopts both the spirit and very physicality of the singer's performance, following every twist and turn of emotion, tone, breathing and movement. While this is an extremely significant, and perhaps pioneering example of how music relates to our sense of

---

<sup>16</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination – Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas, 1981), 51.

physical embodiment (in this case, almost alluding to the popular modern concept of 'mirror neurones'), it is different from the phenomenon I am trying to isolate in the 1610 Vespers. Rather than doubling the direct implications of the text in almost instantaneous mimesis, the doubling of the liturgy is, through its very parodic excess, more autonomous and therefore distanced from the 'normal' chanting of the office of vespers.

Moreover, the music for the psalms and Magnificat is – through the traditional reciting function of the chant that it excessively imitates – already far more distanced from the sense and imagery of the texts than anything Monteverdi wrote in the madrigal or operatic field. One obvious index of Monteverdi's 'overuse' of chant is that he sometimes repeats the opening intonation of the psalm tone beyond the opening of the setting (after the first verse, the psalm tone would customarily begin on the reciting note, thus omitting the intonation); this happens throughout 'Nisi dominus' and in parts of 'Laetatus sum', for instance. In all, the music goes beyond the normal function of reciting the liturgy (what might be considered as essentially a diegetic function) but becomes a form of declaration in its own right, a form of mimetic presentation.<sup>17</sup> But the mimesis is more of the act of recitation than of the meaning and imagery of the texts recited.

One obvious way of making this imitation of recitation evident is through distortion. The 'cantor's' intonation at the opening of 'Dixit dominus' is immediately distorted by syncopation – it is the countersubject in the Altus that establishes the tactus – and, with successive entries at the same pitch (five in all,

---

<sup>17</sup> Karol Berger, *A Theory of Art* (New York and Oxford, 2000), 190-202, provides a rigorous and perceptive analysis of diegesis and mimesis - the narrative and the lyric - in music together with other arts.

the last, Sextus, an octave higher), there is an aural illusion almost the equivalent of multiple vision. The repetitions of both intonation and countersubject are at once more static than traditional polyphony (as if the first point of imitation is somehow stuck in a rut), and more rhetorical in their sense of accumulation. But this is not merely a sort of textual emphasis (as if the text were still overseer of the music, in proper *seconda pratica* fashion), but also a play on the traditional repetitiveness of psalm chanting in a large building, as if several cantors turned up at once or the building had an unhelpful echo. Whatever effect was intended or is experienced, this passage seems to distort both customary church practice and the rhetorical accumulation used in newer styles. There is indeed a sense of intensification, but it is coupled with the obvious stasis of the note polarities of the psalm tone, as if the cyclic rhythm of traditional chanting has somehow subverted the more modern rhetorical elaboration of a text through music.<sup>18</sup>

Example 1 – Dixit Dominus bb. 1-15, vocal parts and bc

This example is not technically much different from the standard ways composers might have used imitative fragments to give the impression of a mood shared between a group of people. In Giovanni Gabrieli's eight-part 'Cantate domino' (*Symphoniae Sacrae* II, 1615), the triadic figure setting the opening word is imitated in close succession by the highest and lowest voices in close succession, creating the mood of joyful singing. This is obviously a form of representation that involves an element of doubling (i.e. the music is 'about' singing to the Lord, while depicting how this might sound in the very act of doing

---

<sup>18</sup> It is instructive to compare this opening with that of one of Monteverdi's later settings of the same text, the second one in *Selva morale* (1640-41). Here the melodic repetitions are similar, as is the shuttling harmony (between tonic and dominant), but the effect is more conventionally rhetorical without the direct reference to the psalm tone.

it). This is essentially the integration of a madrigalian device to stir a joyful affect for devotional purposes. But Monteverdi's 'Dixit dominus' goes further than this in impersonating the actual tone used in a service (a chanting that would normally be affectively neutral). No longer is it simply putting us in the correct mood for understanding the psalm, using secular devices for a sacred purpose, it is more an elaboration and creative distortion of the sort of experience we might actually have in witnessing the office of vespers.

As Whenham observes (above), the second half of the verse is a more standard polyphonic realization, following more or less the stresses of the words. After this point the psalm settles into two consistent patterns for the alternate verses. The even ones are fuller in scoring, involving falsobordone and largely departing from the chant, while the odd ones are for smaller forces, tethered to the chant, which is held in long notes as a cantus firmus. Again, this procedure mimics standard service practice by which verses with the chant can alternate with verses of falsobordone.<sup>19</sup> Monteverdi's decision to adopt the slow cantus firmus for the odd verses means that much of the vocal material is directly repeated as a duet (an increasingly popular texture at the time in both sacred and secular fields). The first of these, 'Virgam virtutis tuae', involves one of the two high voices introducing each of the two halves of the verse, both of which are then repeated by the two singers in direct imitation at the unison (exactly the same procedure is followed in the next odd numbered verse, 'Iuravit Dominus', now for voices in the tenor range). Whether this is heard from the viewpoint of Renaissance polyphony or the more recent expressive styles, it is curiously static.

---

<sup>19</sup> Whenham, *Monteverdi – Vespers*, 62-3. Monteverdi had also used the secular equivalent of falsobordone on occasions in his earlier madrigal collections, such as in 'Sfogava con le stelle' in Book IV and 'Che dar piu vi poss'io' from Book V.



If the chanting of offices regularly slows down one's experience of time (an effect surely shared across the history of chant), Monteverdi seems to have taken this a stage further. Indeed, there are many places in the 1610 Vespers where we might imagine hearing a liturgical performance in slow motion: in the opening of 'Nisi dominus' the bass line and psalm tone (in canon) move very slowly underneath multiple imitations between the voices. There is almost the illusion here of a large double choir texture that has been framed in a new type of time, with the quick and often syncopated interchanges between the upper voices taking place against an overall sense of glacial progress. Exactly the same effect is achieved in the opening and closing verses of the hymn 'Ave maris stella' and the 'Sicut erat in principio', which closes the seven-part Magnificat, and therefore the entire musical setting of Vespers.

In many settings the 'modern' vocal lines are themselves imbued with a sense of chant-like repetition. Again, following Kurzman's alloy model, it is not just a matter of the modern idioms inflecting the chant, but also vice versa. This gives some of the spectacular vocal idioms and expressive gestures, many derived from madrigalian devices, a sort of mechanical quality that contrasts quite strongly with their habitual effect of free, spontaneous textual expression. Cadences often sound as though they have been engineered to provide automatic closure to each range of gestures. For instance, what is particularly striking, and initially unexpected, in 'Dixit dominus', is the chord beginning the second half of each of the even numbered verses, which is on G (major) rather than A (minor - which is the tonality that most satisfactorily accommodates the fourth psalm tone, which gives strong prominence to its fourth degree, a). In each of these verses Monteverdi engineers the closing melismatic section to return back to the

A through two kinds of bass movement: in the first and fourth instances he writes a sequence that descends a third then rises a second (what would later be called a circle of fifths, with every other chord in first inversion); in the second and third, the bass line sequence is a descending fourth followed by a rising third. These sorts of sequence are facilitated by the emerging tonal system and the increasing concentration on the bass as the generator of the harmony. They are readily found in settings by Monteverdi's contemporaries, such as Giovanni Gabrieli's 'Hodie completi sunt' (*Symphoniae Sacrae* II, 1615), which repeatedly features the descending third/rising second pattern. In the context of Monteverdi's 'Dixit dominus' the sequences contrast quite strikingly with the passages of falsobordone, which in their very stasis provide a sort of damming up of the chordal movement. The sequences are patently mechanical: once Monteverdi has decided on the mechanism the remainder of the passage is more or less inevitable up to the closing cadence. While it is possible to describe many Renaissance musical devices – particularly canon – as equally mechanical and geared to musical rather than verbal processes, a canon cannot continue 'on its own'; it requires constant compositional attention and anticipation for dux and comes to work together. But the mechanism that sequential chordal processes can generate only requires compositional intervention in order to bring it to a conclusion.

An even more ingenious sort of mechanism is employed for the Gloria, as Whenham describes,<sup>20</sup> where the chant is unexpectedly transposed down a tone to begin in G minor. This generates a final on D instead of E, after which the chant is repeated beginning on that D (for 'Sicut erat'), and this in turn

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

satisfyingly generates a final on A (minor) the 'home' tonality (now in the Cantus part). After this, the 'Amen' concludes the setting with a plagal cadence on E, thus fulfilling modal propriety. Here, then, Monteverdi had to engage what Whenham terms 'reverse planning' in order to start on the tonality that enables the music to finish correctly without further intervention. The effect of this exercise in early tonal engineering is to break out of the regularity of the psalm, with the rhetorically arresting entry of the Gloria a note too low, but still to create a sense of ordered return for the final 'Amen'.

The second psalm setting, 'Laudate pueri', presents more contrasts based on the progress of the text, but follows many of the same sorts of principles as the 'Dixit dominus'. Again the cantor's opening intonation is taken up by other voices, together with a repeating countersubject; the chant is often used to accompany duets, which have frequent canonic material (but now interspersed with other relationships, such as sensual passages in thirds) and the chant is sometimes transposed (but now in verses 2-4 rather than in the Gloria). There is the same sort of verse-by-verse pacing as in the first setting, but now with a greater variety of events along the way. Most brilliant of all is perhaps the pacing of the third psalm, 'Laetatus sum', which imitates to the greatest degree the liturgical practice of alternating ways of presenting the successive verses. All odd-numbered verses (before the Gloria) are set to a repeating walking-bass pattern and the even ones to two further bass patterns, which themselves alternate. Another pattern is superimposed on these, namely the alternating absence and presence of the psalm tone. This setting has been well analysed in

the literature,<sup>21</sup> so it suffices here to suggest that this is a composition that builds on the amalgamation of two different sound worlds: that of liturgical practice and that of strophic variation. The result is a piece that belongs to both genres yet which is also somehow also *sui generis*. While all the psalm settings contain some elements of word painting (such as the imploring passages in descending thirds for 'Rogate quae ad pacem sunt Ierusalem', 'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem' in 'Laetatus sum'), together with an overall affective stance consonant with the text, they each come with their own individual character, defined more through musical regularities than any specific aspect of the text or psalm tone. This is particularly evident in 'Laetatus sum', which is strongly inflected by the walking bass heard at the outset. By analogy with the walking bass accompanying Orfeo's song, as he leads Euridice out of the underworld (*Orfeo*, 'Qual honor di te fia degno mia cetra onnipotente'), this could be read as a general emblem of joy, compatible with the psalm. But the operatic context also suggests purposeful movement and joyful steps, connotations that do not immediately match the psalm text. In other words, the character of 'Laetatus sum' is not explained solely by its text; the musical character (also involving the history of standard dance patterns) is capable of fitting several affects or senses, but at the same time it has an independent existence, parallel, but not reducible, to the text. The irony is that, given chant represents a tradition in which music functions as a form of recitation rather than as an interpretation or imitation of the text, the elements of the setting derived from more modern, text-expressive, music are themselves turned into a form of recitation, ritualised by the interjections of chant.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-72; Kurtzman, *The Monteverdi Vespers*, 225-31.

While these observations are hardly revelations in themselves, what they together suggest is a composer who is clearly aware of the organizational imperatives of traditional psalm tones, but who creates a form of organization partly independent of these, as if working in parallel to the chant. A more usual procedure might have been either to tether the musical setting more tightly to the chant or to deviate from it entirely in a form of free composition.

Monteverdi's settings of the same psalms in his later *Selva morale* collection (1640-41) are typical of this latter practice, in which the full resources of the composer's later vocabulary are engaged in a rhetorically charged presentation of the text, with only very sporadic references to the psalm tone (if at all).<sup>22</sup> In the 1610 settings Monteverdi frequently submits to various imperatives of his own making, as if these were mimicking the authority that the church tone (and by extension, the Church itself) would traditionally have wielded.

One of the most obvious features at the end of 'Laudate pueri' is Monteverdi's reuse of the opening music for the second half of the Gloria, thus making the common pun on the words 'sicut erat in principio' ('as it was in the beginning'; he uses exactly the same pun at the end of 'Nisi dominus', the fourth psalm setting). In retrospect, this also gives the psalm the sense of a frame for a listener with a reasonable memory, by which everything that was heard in between is potentially recalled as cohering as a whole. But any sense of roundedness, of the psalm coming to completion, is subverted by the 'Amen'. This begins predictably enough, with six of the voices singing in interlocking dotted figures in a closely imitative texture. The tenors who earlier sang the

---

<sup>22</sup> The first 'Dixit dominus' contains a brief passage based on the psalm tone and the first Magnificat opens with an expanding allusion to the intonation of the psalm tone, similar to that of the larger Magnificat setting of 1610.

virtuoso 'Excelsus super omnes gentes Dominus' enter as if joining the overall texture, but very soon the other voices drop out and the tenors are left singing their own imitative duet, bringing back some of their earlier coloratura figures and eventually resolving onto a single pitch. Monteverdi may have got this idea from a passage with similar figuration and resolution in Giovanni Gabrieli's 'Quem vidistis pastores' (*Symphoniae Sacrae* II, 1615), which was published posthumously, but probably composed much earlier.<sup>23</sup> Another source might be the end of 'Ma se con la pieta' from Monteverdi's own Fifth Book of madrigals (1605), where the number of voices steadily diminishes and the two sopranos are left alone on a concluding unison. What is entirely radical about Monteverdi's 1610 setting, though, is the way the other voices preceding the duet fade out, without any independent cadences or even the final syllable of 'Amen'. What they are doing is presenting the illusion of a full polyphonic texture, perhaps the aural equivalent of *trompe l'oeil*, tricking our ears with what is ultimately a sort of sham. It may well be that Monteverdi was inspired by similar tricks of perspective and appearance in visual art; but the effect in music, as played out in the real time of a liturgy, is striking, almost subversive in putting aural effect before allegiance to text (and an 'Amen', at that).

Example 2 – Laudate pueri – Amen section (from b.211 in Kurtzman)

Of course, there is a much more obvious instance of textual trickery in the Vespers, in the 'Audi Coelum', where the echo voice seems to repeat the last syllables of each of the tenor's lines, but subtly changes them to draw out some sort of spiritual point or action (e.g. 'et perfusa gaudio – Audio', 'and suffused with joy – I hear'; 'ut benedicam? – Dicam', 'that I may bless her – I shall tell you').

---

<sup>23</sup> Kurtzman, *The Monteverdi Vespers*, 223. See bb. 71-8, 'et ratum carum pariter'.

But this is an illusion dictated by the text itself, and is indeed part of a long tradition of spiritual echoes.<sup>24</sup> In other words, this has a specific spiritual purpose, capitalizing on the experience of listening as a creative form of mishearing. But this does not necessarily sensitize us to the experience itself, as might the 'Amen' of 'Laudate pueri'.

Following the analogy with visual art we might hear this 'Amen' as coming outside the frame of the piece proper (as defined by the reuse of the opening for 'Sicut erat in principio'); the virtuoso tenors seem to step outside the frame as figures might do in frescoes. But there is also another spatial analogy here: that of the singers receding into the distance (or conversely the listener walking away). This effect would be heard, whether or not the piece were performed in an actual liturgy. If outside the liturgy, we are reminded of exactly the way the ends of church pieces can fade away in large buildings; if within the liturgy, there is another 'doubling' sort of experience, the music impersonating its own ending in real time. Whatever the details of the experience, this unusual ending surely reminds us of the passing of time within the psalm as a whole, the fade-out sharpening our retrospective awareness of the experience we have just had, as if the entire setting had been a procession that was passing us by.

There are several other instances in the Vespers where the writing draws attention to the temporality of a performance. In the larger, seven-voice Magnificat, section 7, 'Deposuit', the pairs of cornetti and violins present their coloratura figures in close imitation to give the effect of echoes, which means that at cadence points the leading instrument arrives on the final note before the

---

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, this text, together with its puns, had been used several times in the years immediately preceding Monteverdi's setting; Kurtzman, *The Monteverdi Vespers*, 148-52.

bass resolves, which happens only when the second instrument reaches the final note (e.g. bb.15-16, 26-27, 30-31).

### Example 3 – Deposuit bb. 269 to end (Kurtzman barring)

In the equivalent setting in Monteverdi's simpler six-part Magnificat, also provided in the 1610 collection, these two virtuoso lines (almost entirely reworked in the seven-part Magnificat, which was most likely written later)<sup>25</sup> are apportioned to two sopranos, where the antecedents to each echo set up even more clashes with the bass (to the text 'et exaltavit humiles'). Exactly the same effect is achieved by two tenors in the 'Gloria patri' (bb. 34-37) of the larger Magnificat, where the continuo does not resolve to the final tonic until the second tenor, as echo, has reached the end of the cadence. Monteverdi presumably drew this idea directly out of his operatic practice in *Orfeo*, from just three years before (although some of the Vesper music was surely composed before 1610, so the order of composition is not certain). The paired violins have a similar sort of teasing cadence in the first verse of 'Possente spirto' (bb. 108, 111) and the cornetti have something similar in the second verse. But in both of these cases the continuo is constantly on the tonic concerned, so there is much less sense of the two melodic parts being out of phase. In the case of the Vespers, then, the effect is more striking than in the opera, and it is as much disorienting as it is sumptuous. The echoes seemingly mimic the sort of acoustical illusion one might experience in a large building. Thus, regardless of where it is performed, we are immediately reminded of a church acoustic, the music doubling the

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-92.



experience of us experiencing the performance.<sup>26</sup> The device might also create the effect of existing in two time zones simultaneously, a couple of seconds apart, thus bringing a renewed sense of groundedness when the resolution is reached. Bars 8-11 of the 'Suscepit Israel' create something similar, with a sense of the psalm tone being out of phase with the two duetting voices. Sometimes Monteverdi achieves a similar effect through rhythmic means, such as in the verse 'De torrente in via bibet' at the end of 'Dixit dominus'. Here most of the voices have sequential passages in triple time cutting across the duple metre and creating an effect of disorientation that suddenly resolves with the cadence. Although one could make a case that this effect could function as word painting for bubbling jets of water ('He shall drink of the brook of the way'), the crucial effect is one of disorientation. Again, the process of listening and the notion of an attentive listener's presence is evoked by the very way the music is written; it surely reminds us of the sort of aural disorientation we can experience in a resonant building. It might also recall the way one's attention can wander during passive participation in a ritual, our hearing and mind coming back into focus after a period of inattention. In a more rarified way, these effects also have the potential to exercise our sense of punctual awareness, stretching our momentary consciousness over a couple of seconds.

---

<sup>26</sup> In some ways, the actual acoustic in which Monteverdi might have performed some or all these pieces is immaterial here, since the music seems designed to create the illusion of reverberation. But Roger Bowers's suggestion that some of this music may have been performed in the chapel of the ducal palace, brings up the tantalizing possibility that it was designed to create the illusion of space in what may have been quite a dry acoustic; Roger Bowers, 'Claudio Monteverdi and Sacred Music in the Household of the Gonzaga Dukes of Mantua, 1590-1612', *Music and Letters*, 90/3 (2009), 331-71.

From a harmonic point of view there is nothing particularly remarkable about these sorts of blurring devices within the liberalized harmonic language that Monteverdi and others were developing as part of the *seconda pratica*. In the sacred concerto 'Nigra sum', for instance, Monteverdi breaks contrapuntal decorum by having the singer reach the next note too early for the bass in b. 40, on the word 'veni' (as part of the text 'rise my friend and come, for the winter is past'). This is something that is entirely in keeping with the meaning of the text (anticipation) and also the emotion of the amorous singer, impetuously exhorting the lover to come.<sup>27</sup> Thus the melodic anticipation makes perfect and immediate sense. But what renders the instances above so rich and complex is the fact that they do not tie in to the representation of a specific emotion or sense. By forcing Monteverdi's implied listener to wait for resolution, the experience is not one like the standard *seconda pratica* representation of an emotion in the very moment of listening but rather suggests the possibility of an increased awareness of the hearing process itself, over a specific span of time. In other words, there is the potential for the listener to gain an immediate awareness of self beyond the standard modes of mimetic representation (by which music might paint a text or create a particular type of character).

One further point to draw from the 'Laudate pueri' is the way the psalm tone is itself occasionally broken up. At the point it is first transposed (up a fifth), there is a momentary break in the second half of the tone, between 'laudabile' and 'nomen Domini' (Altus, b.51). This was possibly done to prevent the tone

---

<sup>27</sup> Monteverdi's use of a male singer for what is obviously a female voice in the text from Song of Songs, might be yet another example of the narrative experimentation that the composer was exercising in the madrigalian context. But it also perhaps serves to reflect the spiritual appropriation of eroticism so central to the meditative practices of the time.

from making a momentary seventh with the bass (as if this were too expressive for a cantus firmus?). Whatever the reason, an even longer break is made in the second half of the next reiteration of the tone, between 'gloria' and 'eius' (bb. 60-64). With the next verse, where the tone is again in its untransposed form, it is even more fragmented, with the first three syllables separated by a beat. Here, the three separated reiterations of the note C (to the words: 'qui', 'in', 'altis', bb. 68-71) coincide with the C in a bass pattern that shuttles between a G and a C. In other words, they are used to colour a repetitive cadence pattern led by the bass, and are therefore secondary to the harmonic progress of the music and not its primary generator.

While this instance of fragmentation seems to function as a way of enhancing the texture, a similar example in the 'Sonata a 8 sopra Sancta Maria' is much more noticeable. Again, the chant (from the Litany of the Saints), set repeatedly to the text 'Sancta Maria ora pro nobis', is very much secondary to the rest of the music, something fitted into a highly developed sonata for a large number of instruments. Indeed, the sonata could just as easily be performed without the litany and still be heard as a complete piece of instrumental music. Much of the piece is generated by setting sequential passages into motion, rather like the figured passages in the even verses of 'Dixit dominus', as if Monteverdi together with his instrumentalists were experimenting with the sequential possibilities of the emerging tonal system. There is almost a sense of permutational variation of both the chordal possibilities and the ornamental figuration that the instruments adopt. A similar permutational flavour inhabits the litany chant, by which there are minor variations verse by verse. We first hear the two halves in one single melodic strain, then split into two for the

second verse, 'Sancta maria' then 'ora pro nobis'. Verse three splits it into three 'Sancta Maria', 'ora pro' and 'nobis.' Verses four and five seem to complete the symmetry by returning to the twofold split and then the continuous version. Verses six to eight seem to form a triptych with the outer repetitions split in the middle, in the traditional way, but with the central one (verse 7) split in a way that has not yet occurred, 'Sancta Maria ora' and 'pro nobis'.

This most striking verse of all follows, verse 9, in which the chant becomes progressively fragmented.<sup>28</sup> In the second half of the verse, there are two rests, dotted semibreves, between 'O', 'ra' and 'pro'; now all syllables are double length, with the exception of the standard dotted semibreve on 'ra' and 'bis'.

Example 4 (vv. 6-9) – just the vocal cantus firmus (starting b. 179 in Kurtzman edition) – probably with the old reading a b. 219.

Whenham describes this process as one in which 'the *cantus firmus* is broken into short, sobbing phrases',<sup>29</sup> and this indeed captures the sense of a curiously emotional colouring of the litany, cutting across the technical brilliance of the instrumental writing. The unevenness of both the note lengths and the intrusive rests in verse 9 mean that we cannot fail to notice the chant, its disintegration perhaps bringing an element of pathos, as if it were struggling to

---

<sup>28</sup> Following the notation in the original print, there is a particularly unusual pattern to the first half of the chant. The first three rests each grow by a beat (minim, semibreve, dotted semibreve), which causes the 'Ma-' of 'Maria' to be syncopated. As if to compensate, the 'ri' is double length and is not separated from the next syllable. However, Kurtzman clearly considers the second rest, a semibreve, to be an error, thus bringing the 'Ma-' out of its syncopated position (and indeed this mark - if it is indeed a semibreve rest - is very poorly printed). See Jeffrey Kurtzman (ed.), *Claudio Monteverdi – Vespri della beata vergine (1610)*, performing score (Oxford, 1999), 132 (b. 219).

<sup>29</sup> Whenham, *Monteverdi – Vespers*, 57.

be heard through the relentless cheerfulness of the instrumental dance. Again, this could also be heard as replicating something of our actual experience of listening: our attention to the litany here is likely to be intermittent, as if this were a necessary but secondary element of the piece that we barely notice after its first few appearances; the different ways of dividing the syllables, up to the extreme version of verse 9, mirrors something of our experience of varying attention. There may again be something of the acoustical tricks that large buildings can play on any listener, by which something that was delivered as a whole can seem broken up when heard from certain positions.

The final verses, ten to eleven, each present the chant as a whole without a break, and these coincide with an instrumental recapitulation of some of the opening music (which, interestingly, was heard without the chant before). So the sonata concludes both with a sense of returning to the opening order, framing our experience as a whole, and of combining the elements in further ways. One possible result of the whole experience is that we hear the litany as somehow having survived against all odds, thus strengthening its spiritual resolve; but this enhancing of the religious purpose of the piece also opens up the possibility of our hearing the litany as dominated by everything around it, as all but succumbing to a variety of generative musical processes and literally disintegrating before our ears. It is noticeable that Monteverdi's later use of this litany chant, in a setting of 'Santa Maria, succurre miseris' (1618/27) sounds far more orthodox, even though the chant is eventually absorbed into the free imitative texture shared by the duetting sopranos.<sup>30</sup> In the 1610 setting the use of the chant is more insistent and it is doggedly independent of any form of

---

<sup>30</sup> See Fabbri, *Monteverdi*, 115.

musical absorption or development. Yet it is this more literal setting that seems to set up a radical dichotomy between the world of liturgical chant and that of modern instrumental music.

This sense of alienation between liturgical and musical practice recedes in much of Monteverdi's later church music, largely published in the *Selva morale e spirituale* (1640-41) and the posthumous *Messa a Quattro voci et salmi* (1650). Within the tremendous richness and variety that these collections offer there is an obvious development of the parameters that tonality affords, particularly the strong sequential patterns that were typical in the 1610 'Dixit dominus' setting. There is also a much more directed, rhetorical delivery of each segment of text, involving much repetition and dialogue (sometimes with instruments). The large, first 'Dixit Dominus' setting of the *Selva morale* contains several echoes of the 1610 psalm, such as the repetition of the opening line for all the singers in a form of metrical falsobordone, which later returns as a sort of refrain. The psalm tone makes a brief cameo appearance at the text 'emittet Dominus ex Sion' but it is otherwise not used in the literal and repetitive manner of 1610. In many ways, the later setting is more 'finished' as a piece of music, more formally structured. Yet it serves its liturgical function effortlessly, by providing a clear presentation of the text and detailed musical elaboration that parallels the sort of exegesis a commentary on the psalms might provide. The most up-to-date musical 'technology' is co-opted in the service of a traditional liturgy.

The one tendency from the earlier music that is taken noticeably further is the 'mechanised' nature of the harmonic sequences, by which much of the music is generated. Large sections of settings such as the first 'Beatus vir' or the 'Laudate dominum omnes gentes' are generated by walking basses consisting of

flexible, largely repeating cells. Another major development in terms of ‘musical dominance’ is the way the melody instruments become part of the narrative level of the music, frequently dialoguing with the voices as if they were presenting the same text (the ritornelli in the ‘Dixit dominus’ of the 1610 Vespers are optional, it will be remembered). In all, this later music has lost something of the ritualized nature of the 1610 settings, but with this it has also lost that peculiar rivalry between the liturgies outside and within the music. The musical setting is indeed more of a world in its own right, delineated by its own formal procedures, but it is one that fulfils its liturgical function without obvious conflict.

From this point of view, some of the 1610 music sounds more experimental, perhaps more radical. Monteverdi was, after all, far less experienced as a church composer at this time (his regular employment as a church musician was yet to come).<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the two 1610 psalm settings that I have not examined in any detail, ‘Nisi Dominus’ and ‘Lauda Jerusalem’ are much more orthodox in their general presentation of the text, and this might support the supposition that these are earlier pieces and were thus among those that were most likely performed before the 1610 publication.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps what has rendered the collection as a whole so attractive to later reception is the fact that a composer at the cutting edge of madrigal and operatic production approached his first major church collection with the ambition of assimilating the psalm tone practice on the greatest possible scale, together with the most expressive and modern idiom of the sacred concerto, and ended up with a striking amalgam that he could never repeat.

---

<sup>31</sup> For speculations about Monteverdi’s composition of church music in Mantua, see Roger Bowers, ‘Claudio Monteverdi and Sacred Music..

<sup>32</sup> Kurtzman, *The Monteverdi Vespers*, 230.

What are we to make of all these observations and are there any common ideas that draw them together? One simple explanation might be that they reflect a basic trend towards secularization, as is so often observed in the intrusions of madrigalian, operatic and monodic elements into church music of the early seventeenth century. Depending on one's view of the relationship between music and religious practice, such intrusions can be condemned (for breaking down the essential difference between the spiritual and the worldly, for instance) or welcomed (extending the expressive range and effect of music in order to enhance the listener's devotion). But the standard stories of secularization do not seem quite adequate here and the interplay of sacred and secular musical elements has in any case a history stretching right back to the earliest years of notated music. The points I have highlighted in my analysis of the music split into roughly three areas: those in which the music doubles, impersonates or renders strange the actual musical practice of the standard liturgy (so it is 'about' liturgical music as much as being an example of it); those in which the music presents its own sense of order, parallel but not reducible to that of the psalm tones and independent of the structure and expression of the text (this is the element that Monteverdi was most to develop in his later music); those in which aspects of the music remind us of the experience we are simultaneously having and of experiences we might have had in the past. In this latter sense, particularly, the music does more than act as the form of 'representation' that is so often seen as the essence of seventeenth century music,<sup>33</sup> since it has the potential to turn that representation into a closer awareness of the experience

---

<sup>33</sup> For an extensive examination of the concept of representation, see Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song – An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, 1998), 35.



one is actually having, quite independently of what the music might signify or affectively magnify. In one sense, the customary cyclic nature of ritual time – taking one out of the stream of normal, everyday, time consciousness - is subverted by the focus on the immediate presence of Monteverdi's implied listener. Yet, at the same time, this sense of listening presence is itself re-ritualized by the quasi-liturgical flow of the music.

What these three trends constitute is not the sort of secularization by which the religious is devalued or superseded; quite the opposite perhaps. This is music that reminds us of actual church practice (far more than in most of Monteverdi's other church music), but it also imposes a parallel form of order or discipline. Furthermore, it focuses on the individual's experience and perhaps encourages one to develop a form of attention that would not otherwise have been so likely. What this might suggest is a quasi-religious practice in its own right, within the world of music, a religion that can be engaged to double that of the church but which can also conceivably act independently of this. Moreover, this is a religion quite different from that which embraces the traditional cosmic view of music as of a piece with the larger and unseen reality of God's creation (a view that many contemporaries, and probably Monteverdi himself, shared).<sup>34</sup> This is a musical religion that is potentially separate from the church, alive within the mind of the contemplating individual. I would suggest that this is nothing less than a foretaste of the 'religion' that eventually characterizes the so-called 'classical' tradition in western music, something that – I propose - was seeded around the time of Monteverdi, continued throughout the next two centuries, and which lost its privileged position towards the end of the twentieth

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-16.

century. It is during this era, which I would loosely define as that of musical modernity, that the classical canon develops as an art form that is seen to be worthwhile and which takes over some of the trappings of religious practice.<sup>35</sup> From a religious standpoint it therefore has the potential to be both ally and parasite.

I am claiming that Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers provides significant evidence that a new culture of music is developing, one that accords music a sort of autonomy and significance that it never had before. This outlook is dependent on a new focus on the self as something experiencing existence more profoundly within a situated worldly actuality rather than as something more of a piece with an unseen cosmos. In other words, a sense of listening seems to be anticipated by the way the music is written: the music models different forms of attention – including inattention – and uses several devices to make one more alive to the actual occasion concerned. None of this is controversial within the broader cultural context at the turn of the seventeenth century: meditations on the puzzles of selfhood are obvious in the autobiographical writings of Montaigne, Cervantes' satire or in much of the English dramatic and poetic literature of the time. What is striking is the way this becomes manifest in music and how it co-opts existing religious practices.

What sorts of religious listening practice might Monteverdi's original audience have encountered or adopted? As Andrew Dell'Antonio has observed, various forms of connoisseurship were cultivated among elite listeners directly

---

<sup>35</sup> This is an approach that I have developed at length in *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity – Perspectives on the Passions* (Cambridge, 2010). Of the many recent explorations of the connections between the classical music tradition and western modernity, Julian Johnson's *Out of Time: Music and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford, 2015), is perhaps the most far-reaching.

as a result of meditative practices engendered by the Catholic Reformation. Rhetorical methods of Cicero, coupled with the subjective meditation of Augustine and the Franciscan *imitatio Christi*, were co-opted by a newly invigorated meditative practice, most commonly associated with St Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuit order.<sup>36</sup> Here the rhetorical trio of delighting, moving and teaching was directed towards the experience of art in the development of the ‘correct’ spirituality. In some ways, the active listening state, together with the methods of self-monitoring and the cultivation of individual transcendence, seem to lay the perfect ground for the sorts of listening I claim to have been calculated within the textures of the 1610 Vespers.

The co-option of memory, particularly of cultural artefacts and performances, is certainly a part of this culture.<sup>37</sup> But this seems not to translate into an awareness of the self as persisting in time, not least because the goal of spiritual exercises is to cultivate an immediate transcendence that invites a loss of selfhood and a simultaneous adherence to the divine.<sup>38</sup> In short, the type of connoisseurship as developed through spiritual exercises does not adequately explain the doublings of experience and the distortions in moment by moment time of the 1610 Vespers. The aim of spiritual exercises is always to incline the listener towards the ‘correct’ spiritual state, and not to become aware of the self independently and neutrally, in the act of listening.

In fact, it is not surprising to find that such awareness is not articulated in the sources of Monteverdi’s time since it was considerably later in the century

---

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Dell’Antonio, *Listening as Spiritual Practice in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley, 2011), esp. 31-6, 55-80.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

that diachronic identity was first adequately discussed. As Udo Thiel observes, before the early modern conception of consciousness began to develop (one, moreover, that forms the basis of most later conceptions), any reflections on consciousness were geared towards spiritual development. Indeed, the concepts of 'consciousness' and 'conscience' were interchangeable and therefore 'consciousness' could never involve a non-evaluative description. Only with Descartes did such a notion become possible, although this is not yet ascribed a constitutive function for the self as a person.<sup>39</sup> It was in English thought that the notion of diachronic identity began to take shape, and specifically in the work of John Locke.<sup>40</sup> In turning completely against the notion of defining the self in terms of the inherited scholastic view – namely that the self relies on a consistency of substance – Locke develops the idea that the 'person' (as opposed to the soul or body) can *only* be conceived in terms of continuity of consciousness:

Consciousness alone unites actions into the same person. But though the same immaterial substance or soul does not alone, wherever it be, and in whatsoever state, make the same *man*; yet it is plain, consciousness, as far as ever it can be extended...unites existences and actions very remote in time into the same *person*, as well as it does the existences and actions of the immediately preceding moment....[P]lace that self in what *substance* you please...I who write this am the same *myself* now whilst I write (whether I consist of all the same substance, material or immaterial, or no) that I was yesterday. For as to this point of being

---

<sup>39</sup> Udo Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (Oxford and New York, 2011), 2-9, 45-61.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-111.

the same self, it matters not whether this present self be made up of the same or other substances[.]<sup>41</sup>

The early modern self is therefore defined in terms of consciousness over time, involving continuities, breaks, recollections and memories. It is performative rather than substantial and therefore particularly suited to an affinity with music as an art of performance and listening. To the degree that this conception of the self can be associated with the musical work of early modernity, Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers provides a particularly striking insight into the early development of this process.

If the diachronic conception of the person seems to undercut beliefs in fixed identities founded in scholastic thought, music might encourage us to model this process through which we acquire this sense of our personhood, in real time. Therefore I suggest that Monteverdi's 'parallel' liturgy, while intensely adopting the chanting practices of Vespers, invites listeners to reflect on the experience of listening as much as it might necessarily encourage them to be immersed in the 'correct' spiritual experience. The notion of developing a sort of musical practice parallel to the liturgical one is also of a piece with another tendency of the time: the co-existence of several (and not necessarily compatible) systems simultaneously. In Monteverdi's case this would be most obviously documented in the *prima/seconda pratica* divide, something that arguably marks the beginnings of musical pluralism in western musical culture

---

<sup>41</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1694), book 2, ch. 27/16, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* edition (Chicago, 1952), 224.

and the co-existence of more than one language and ideology of music.

'Polyglossia' – Mikhail Bakhtin's term for the use of two or more languages within a single culture – means that even if each language is to remain unchanged, it 'is, as it were, reborn, becoming qualitatively a different thing for the consciousness that creates in it.'<sup>42</sup> The same is perhaps true of the interplay of religion and music. Once music has an element of independence from its *prima pratica* 'embeddedness' within religious culture, it can provide a distance and commentary on religion that is potentially subversive. But the music is at the same time afforded a seriousness of intent deriving from its religious content. Bakhtin suggests that a particular type of novelistic language becomes possible '[t]hanks to the ability of a language to represent another language while still retaining the capacity to sound simultaneously both outside it and within it, to talk about it and at the same time to talk in and with it – and thanks to the ability of the language being represented simultaneously to serve as an object of representation while continuing to be able to speak to itself'.<sup>43</sup> Exactly the same thing might be said of the sort of musical culture that Monteverdi is exploring in the 1610 Vespers.<sup>44</sup>

The notion of one language representing another while not losing its original reference also reflects the growing early modern trend towards imagining a different reality specifically as a tool towards understanding and rethinking our own. Most significant here is Descartes' posthumous *Traité du*

---

<sup>42</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 12.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

<sup>44</sup> Recent Monteverdi scholarship has begun to observe other novelistic features in Monteverdi's works, from the intersubjective and self-reflective of the poetic texts and musical scoring of the later madrigal books, to the development of operatic structures that move towards disregarding the dramatic unities. Calcano, *From Madrigal to Opera*, 207, 245.

*monde et de la lumiere*, 1664. Descartes' approach involves actually putting oneself in the position of God and assimilating his omniscience: 'since we are taking the liberty of fashioning this matter as we fancy, let us attribute to it, if we may, a nature in which there is absolutely nothing that everyone cannot know as perfectly as possible.'<sup>47</sup> I would suggest that Monteverdi's approach to his 1610 Vesper settings likewise constitutes a remodelling of the type of world received in the liturgy, one that may encourage us to develop a self-reflexive attitude to the experience of the music and the ritual time of a liturgy. There is clearly a sense in which the music is fictitious; it is not automatically an actual Vesper liturgy. To become one it has to be performed in the right context and with the right intentions. But the very fact that it can function within the liturgy suggests that it is a sort of 'useful fiction', something that can be used to enhance a number of human practices and disciplines.<sup>48</sup>

Given the focus on the individual's listening experience this music also brings up the possibility of an outward and inward approach to religious practice, by which the outward trappings of a vesper service are largely preserved, but the music also models – or at least enables – a range of possible inner experiences. One might be reminded here of Thomas Hobbes's view – a few decades later, and in a very different political and confessional context – that the outward expression of orthodox religion and inner convictions could be very different things. Within his political theory of the peaceful commonwealth as a singular

---

<sup>47</sup> John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 2 (Cambridge, 1985), *The World*, ch. 6, 90.

<sup>48</sup> For an excellent study of fictionality, see Catherine Gallagher, 'The Rise of Fictionality', in Franco Moretti (ed.), *The Novel*, vol. 1, *History, Geography, and Culture* (Princeton, 2006), 336-63.

body comprising all the individual cells of its citizens it was important that public religion was uniform, as dictated by the sovereign:

Public is the worship that a Commonwealth performeth, as one person. Private is that which a private person exhibiteth. Public, in respect of the whole Commonwealth, is free; but in respect of particular men it is not so. Private is in secret free; but in the sight of the multitude it is never without some restraint, either from the laws or from the opinion of men; which is contrary to the nature of liberty.<sup>49</sup>

What is relevant about this view in relation to the larger context of early seventeenth century thought is the way it is justified with the type of dualistic thinking that is so readily associated with Continental thought. Given that the kingdom of Christ is not of this world (at least until his return), one's spiritual allegiance can be entirely separate from one's worldly solidarity with an artificial political entity: 'faith hath no relation to, nor dependence at all upon, compulsion or commandment'; 'But spiritual Commonwealth there is none in this world'.<sup>50</sup> In this respect, it does not even matter if the sovereign forbids the Christian religion, since commands have no effect on belief. Even 'Profession with the tongue is but an external thing' so that one can effectively proclaim one thing while believing in another. By means of a somewhat convoluted logic, this is not the same as denying Christ before men (as Jesus forbid), but is merely an expression of the sovereign himself (since one is merely a cell in this larger

---

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or, Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (1651), ed. Nelle Fuller, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* edition (Chicago, 1952), 162 (ch. 31).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 209, 238 (ch. 42).



organism). All of this presupposes a distinction between body and soul (which Hobbes, writing some time before Locke, essentially conflates with mind),<sup>51</sup> the former as part of a material world that requires authoritarian order if everlasting conflict is to be avoided, the latter allowing considerable deviation from whatever can publically be expressed.

However dishonest or even cowardly Hobbes's proposal might seem, it is extremely significant in allowing that the self is more than a unitary given, and that different aspects of the self might emerge in different circumstances. It marks a departure from the notion of a given, natural order, since the political and social commonwealth can only be created through the acknowledgement of its very necessary artificiality (indeed, Hobbes makes the artificial central to his entire argument, from the very first sentences of *Leviathan*).<sup>52</sup> I would suggest that there are, in some early seventeenth century examples, also hints of music moving from an embodiment of natural order to an intimation of necessary artificiality. Indeed, such artificiality is absolutely central to the tonal system itself, dependent as it is on a form of tempered tuning and permitting sequential harmonic patterns like some of Monteverdi's that, once set in motion, work like clockwork.

In bringing up the distinction between private and public religion I am not attempting to suggest that Monteverdi was somehow trying to set up some sort

---

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-10; indeed Hobbes quotes Jesus's saying from Matthew 10.28: 'Fear not those that kill the body, but cannot kill the soul.', 240.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 47 (introduction), 'Nature (the art whereby God hath made and governs the world) is by the art of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an artificial animal....For by art is created that great Leviathan called a Commonwealth, or State...which is but an artificial man, though of greater stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defence it was intended; and in which the sovereignty is an artificial soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body'.

of alternative, heretical message in his 1610 Vespers; there is nothing to suggest that he deviated from orthodox Roman practice or faith. But what he does achieve through the very modeling of his music on the chanting of the liturgy is the notion of an alternative sort of discipline, one that somehow accounts for a possible range of individual experiences. Music thereby acquires a new seriousness, a potential importance that is separate from its traditional cosmic roots. It offers a model for the negotiation between public and private realms, different systems of cultural style, freedom and necessity, belief and feeling. In short, it becomes a 'useful fiction' for negotiating an increasingly uncertain world, a secular sort of religion that grows out of, and intersects with, the established confessions of the Christian west. This, then, is central to the way in which I define the modern musical work, something which only became fully evident with the Germanic culture of 'Kunstreligion' in the nineteenth century, but which carried the same characteristics of serious, fictional import and the exercise of diachronic subjectivity on the part of its listenership, well into the twentieth century.

It is unlikely that many of the aspects I have discussed in Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers would have been immediately evident to his contemporaries, or even necessarily consciously intended by the composer. Intellectual articulations of the fragmentation and diversification of a unified worldview doubtless relied on many unconscious tendencies of the time, of which music of this kind may be both representative and constitutive. In the words of Georg Lukács, 'the very disintegration and inadequacy of the world is the pre-condition for the existence

of art and its becoming conscious.’<sup>53</sup> I would suggest that Monteverdi’s 1610 Vespers marks something close to the beginning of a process by which music became a sort of compensation (re-enchantment?) for the perceived (or imagined) loss of a former sort of world in which all visible and invisible elements cohered.

Much has been learned by considering the types of liturgy and building in which this music could have been sung; the urge for reconstruction, both in scholarly work and in performance, certainly brings us closer to the creative context in which Monteverdi was working and in which he intended to wield greater influence. However, in swimming against much of the tide in recent scholarly approaches, I would suggest that tying this work to a specific event or ecclesiastical context ultimately obscures a major point: I propose that Monteverdi was creating a virtual event both within the individual component movements and also within the flow of the work as a whole. Roger Bowers is surely right in suggesting that the insertion of the non-liturgical sacred concertos and the opening responsory, adapted from *Orfeo*, together conspire to create a ‘grand scheme of rational and all-inclusive narrative order comparable to that of *Orfeo*....its messy inconsistencies veiled behind a cunningly contrived façade of temporal linearity and intellectual cohesion.’<sup>55</sup> Bowers seems to hit the nail on the head with his conclusion that Monteverdi provided an ‘imaginary, idealized and much inflated version’ of the sorts of services he had heard in Mantua and that he had ‘inadvertently generated a whole that to present-day sensibilities has

---

<sup>53</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel – a Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 38.

<sup>55</sup> Bowers, ‘Claudio Monteverdi and Sacred Music’, 370.

proved amenable to appreciation'.<sup>56</sup> As, putatively, the first 'modern musical work' it renders strange many elements of its own historical context, working as a parody of itself and, in turn, harnessing the listener's attention in self-reflective ways. If the work has in some sense been brought back to life through the sumptuous sonic (and sometimes visual and spacial) forces of modern performance practice, there is surely evidence that its power to evoke space, time and a ritualized atmosphere derives from Monteverdi's almost uncanny co-option of his own experiences of musical performance and religious practice..

---

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 370-1.

## **CAPTIONS**

**Example 1** – Opening of Dixit Dominus

**Example 2** – Laudate pueri (bb. 221-end)

**Example 3** – Deposuit potentes (bb. 269-273)

**Example 4** – Sonata a 8 sopra ‘Sancta Maria ora pro nobis’ (bb. 179-236)